Self-paced learning: Investigating an online Tatar language course

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Abstract

The research[1] presented in this paper is a part of a larger project aimed at investigating the useful and challenging components of a self-paced online Tatar language school Ana Tele ("Mother Tongue"), which was designed in Kazan Federal University, Russia. We emphasized the importance of developing open online courses for such less commonly used languages as Tatar in order to support their ethnic identity and cultural integrity.

Ana Tele is a unique and relatively new online environment for learning the Tatar language. It was launched in 2012 and within four years of its functioning has engaged 10084 users. In this study, we made a focus on a self-paced format of the course and analyzed the advantages and challenges of the project taking into account both the students' and the course-developers' perceptions. The data comprise a survey which was carried out with randomly chosen students of the course (N=170), face-to-face interviews with course participants who completed the survey (N=10) and course developers including technical administrators (N=2), and the instructors (N=8).

We have found out that self-paced format of the course meets the demands of its users. Implications for improving Ana Tele platform are discussed on the issues of the content as well as technological maintenance. In particular, insertion of more detailed instructions to all activities and assignments could help students self-regulate study time and develop effective learning strategies according to their individual targets. Collaborative activities are closely connected with technical support and technical possibilities; their use could be helpful as students appreciate activities of this format. The improvements discussed are aimed at increasing students' motivation, self-regulation and overall course satisfaction.

Keywords: Tatar language, online learning, self-paced language course, self-regulation, collaborative activities

Introduction

A lot of research work has been done so far in the way foreign languages could be studied by means of establishing online environments and online platforms. Forms of education relevant to modern society include online courses, e-learning practices and distance-learning environments, each having its specific users that determine the choice of instruments, tools and techniques (Song et al., 2004; Meskill and Sadykova, 2011; Moore et al., 2011). In the broadest meaning the most significant difference between the types of environments available nowadays for language

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[1] This research is a part of a larger project upon which the following reports have been made: "International Online Language Teaching: Collaborative and Natural vs. Self-paced and Structured", 6th COIL Conference *Can Collaborative Online International Learning Be Normalized?* (March 20-21, 2014, SUNY Global Center, New York City); "Learning Tatar Language Online: Does the COIL Model Fit?", 7th COIL Conference *The Expanding Landscape of COIL Practitioners, Networks, and Hubs: What's Next?* (March 19-20, 2015, SUNY Global Center, New York City, USA).

learners is in the degree of suggested collaborative activities and interactive means. As a result, online language courses could be roughly divided into collaborative and self-paced ones. Though collaboration is essentially important while studying any language (Tan et al., 2010; Sadykova, 2014; Kuo et al., 2014; Tang and Lam, 2014), self-paced learning environments are becoming increasingly popular with e-learners, since the format of a self-regulated practice can meet the requirements of those who lack time, confidence or abilities to acquire knowledge as rapidly as other learners.

The growth of online language courses both in higher education settings and extension courses prove the fact that language learning is among the most popular educational activities. This research is based on the practice of an open online platform for learning the Tatar language *Ana Tele*, which means "Mother Tongue" in Tatar (anatele.ef.com), and despite the fact that the course is in Cyrillic alphabet it gained great popularity.The course was designed in Kazan Federal University, Russia. 10084 learners have registered for the course so far (9821 students from Russia, 263 users from other countries, such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Ukraine, India, Turkey, the USA, China, Canada, Finland, Australia, Greece, Spain, Hungary, France, Germany and others).

Tatar is one of the Turkish languages, the mother tongue of Tatars who represent the second largest ethnic group in Russia mostly living in Tatarstan, an autonomous republic in the Russian Federation. Interest towards its national language has been especially encouraged since adoption of the Declaration of the sovereignty of the republic in 1990. The Law on the Languages of Peoples of the Russian Federation (1991), and other official acts regulating Tatarstan sovereignty (1992) were aimed at the proclamation of Tatar as the official language along with Russian. Tatarstan received an official status of a bilingual territory, which enabled the government to employ a number of national language revival programs promoting Tatar national language and culture in the region and outside the republic, especially in other regions of the former Soviet Union (Wertheim,2012). Tatar is a minority language spoken in the Russian Federation (about 4,3 million), and though being on the way to revival, it is still largely dominated by Russian, a majority language (137,5 million people) (Gorenburg, 2006; Wertheim, 2012;Natsional'nyy, 2010). Despite the fact that there is a strong governmental support (e.g. Tatar national schools opened in the region, and the language is taught at state schools as the second language), its social prestige is not high enough. Similar to other minority languages in Russia, Tatar is not used in the system of public administration, as well as social and political spheres. Researchers emphasize the importance of developing courses which support languages used by ethnic minority groups (Fatkhullova et al., 2013).

Ana Tele school offers 9 levels of learning Tatar (from beginner to advanced), each including 8 sections, 72 self-teaching sections in total 296 lessons, 296 6372 exercises, 9 level tests, 293 video films, 10960 audio records, 6795 photos, as well as laboratories of pronunciation, writing and grammar. *Ana Tele* focuses on four skills: reading, speaking, writing and listening. The language learning activities in the course are introduced by brief instructions. The course content includes the following activities: watching videos, learning new words, using new vocabulary in contexts and situations, grammar study, listening comprehension tasks, writing (gap-filling) and taking part in live speaking sessions with tutors and other students of the same level. The course is open to everyone interested in learning Tatar, available 24 hours and free of charge. This makes *Ana Tele* attractive both to learners in Russia and learners in other countries, such as Turkey, China, the USA, Finland, Poland and Germany where Tatar diasporas are located.

A self-paced format of the course indicates that the learners should be highly motivated and have sufficient study habits and minimum computer literacy. The students are to guide their learning activities; they decide how to schedule study and re-study, the period and place, choose the level independently etc. Consequently, the ability to guide learning process influences the effectiveness of their achievements in increasing language skills.

The idea of learning the Tatar language with *Ana Tele* is that students gradually study and learn all language levels in close cultural context. Students enjoy neatly selected and well organized vocabulary and listening activities that focus on different elements of Tatar culture: topics and tasks related to national holidays, national food, traditions and culturally specific vocabulary, which is supposed to be extremely important while developing second language proficiency.

This paper contributes some evidence on the problem of learning a minority language in a self-paced format, especially challenges one can face while building a self-paced course aimed at studying Tatar as the second language. The main objective of the research and the experiment carried out within it is to get reflective feedback from the students and the course developers on the efficiency of studying Tatar as the second language. Since the school is approximately young, though gaining popularity, any changes and improvements would be beneficial.

Literature review and theoretical perspectives

As the term "self-paced" suggests, this type of learning is based on engaging students, mostly adults, in learning activities which they can follow at their individual and natural pace. Compared to numerous traditional online learning environments, normally designed for students of approximately the same age, where instructors/teachers suggest time limitations, scheduling, prescriptions and other means of student guidance, self-paced online courses are supposed to meet the demands of a heterogeneous community, each member willing to acquire desired knowledge at a comfortable pace due to professional and personal circumstances, including previous learning experience, psychological and other factors. As a result, an elaborate self-paced learning environment becomes successful in case its content, management strategies, suggested types of activities are largely flexible and diverse since such are the demands and objectives of the students.

Appropriateness of self-paced learning for the age group of adults has been mentioned in numerous studies that focused on the phenomena of self-directed learning and self-regulation. Self-directed learning is based on the idea that psychologically adults tend to be proactive rather than reactive in their individual approaches to analyze suggested learning resources (Rhode, 2008). Viewed as a method of instruction, self-directed learning enables an adult to take a substantial amount of responsibility for the learning process, whereas dynamic communication among teacher, learner and curriculum suggests important interaction which develops self-direction and choice of individual learning paths (Lee and Gibson, 2003).

The social aspect of self-regulation which can be traced back to the Vygotsky's ideas and his theory of learning (1978) is based on the assumption that interactive activities employed during teacher-regulated learning process should foster the desire to learn independently or in self-regulated manner (Pressley,1995). A notion of self-regulated learning can serve as a good theoretical basis from which a modern self-paced language course can benefit. The model suggested by Zimmerman consists of three phases: *forethought*, when the goals to further learning are set, short-term and long-term, easy and challenging; *performance/volitional control* which is closely connected with time management; and *self-reflection phase*, when learners get a feedback of the assignment they have completed (Zimmerman, 1998). As proved in further studies, various options can stimulate different learning environments,

including interactive ones, where learners can work at their own pace and according to their personal needs. Decision-making skills result in increasing the level of self-efficacy and developing positive time management strategies (Terry and Doolittle, 2008). Dell claims that effective teaching models have long-lasting positive consequences in different life situations, so "knowing that adult learners may increase self-regulation during online instruction could lead instructors to provide scaffolding and strategies to encourage self-regulation for learners who are not demonstrating success in online classes" (Dell, 2006).

Insight into psychological aspects of the problem and a number of experiments carried out revealed some advantages of self-paced learning (Dunlosky and Thiede, 1998; Son and Metcalfe, 2000; Tullis and Benjamin, 2011; Dunlosky et al.,2011; Bjork et al., 2013). Self-pacing can improve a learner's memory performance on condition that appropriate allocation strategies are used (Tullis and Benjamin, 2011). The ability to guide oneself and self-regulate study time, which is extremely important in self-paced learning environments, hugely depends on idiosyncratic traits and metacognition of a student resulting on a learner's interest and motivation (Son and Metcalfe, 2000). Another important finding is that a metacognitive phenomenon of self-learning is connected with certain illusions and misunderstandings of how to learn effectively. In particular, self-pacers often base their learning process and self-instruction work on a faulty mental model due to which their learning process may take a wrong path (Bjork et al., 2013). Hence, accurate monitoring is rather beneficial to those self-pacers who lack abilities to monitor and control their study otherwise their course-satisfaction can be low (Son and Kornell, 2009).

Self-paced learning language courses require a specific approach to collaborative activities. Though collaboration is supposed to be retained, in practice student-student and teacher-student interaction might be problematic, since self-paced learning, as stated above, is not based on the practices of completing certain assignments in a strictly instructed time. Though dropout rates of online coursesare estimated to be very high in general,reasons varying from student factors, course factors to environment ones (Lee, 2011), self-pacers are especially prone to drop out of the course or enroll a new one, which they consider to be more convenient and suitable to their personal interests and professional schedules. These flexibilities result on the size of the course which can be changeable and a number of learners participating in certain activities at a particular time (Rhode, 2008).

The study will address the following research questions: 1) What are the students' reflections of the self-paced online Tatar language course? 2) What do the course developers suggest to improve and develop the school *Ana Tele*? These research questions provide some orientation to course developers working on *Ana Tele* content and help eliminate the drawbacks.

Methods

This survey explores Tatar language acquisition project *Ana Tele* which was launched by the government of Tatarstan in order to support and promote Tatar national language and culture within and outside the republic. The Tatar language, as well as Tatar literature and culture need to be promoted through the following: 1) developing the methodology of teaching Tatar as a second/foreign language; 2) developing examination system for Tatar as a second/foreign language; 3) improving the quality of Tatar language teaching; 4) enhancing confidence to use the Tatar language in naturalistic environment; 5) supporting bilingualism of the region.

The research study was carried out in Kazan Federal University in Russia in

February 2015. The research consisted of a two-stage, mixed methods study (see Table 1). In the first stage one hundred and seventy (N=170) students (active users) of different ages and genders learning the Tatar language with the open online course *Ana Tele* were randomly chosen to participate in the survey. Most students were from Tatarstan (Russia) and there were Tatar language learners from other countries (Kazakhstan, Turkey and the USA). Sixty-eight participants were under 35, sixty participants were aged from 36 to 45 and the remaining forty-two participants were over 46 years old. There were 160 (94%) females and 10 (6%) males (see the summary in Table 1). All participants were contacted by the researchers by email and asked to voluntarily participate in this study. A questionnaire consisting of seven items was used as a survey instrument. The survey included closed-ended questions related to participants' demographic information, level of self-motivation and reflective assessment of the course. Students were given (sent by email) the questionnaire which was returned upon completion. This procedure was carried out within two days.

The students were also asked to provide additional contact information if they agree to participate in a follow-up face-to-face interview. Ten (N=10) students were willing to participate in the follow-up interview and answer the researchers' questions about the benefits and challenging components of the course.

The second stage included face-to-face interviews with ten (N=10) course developers (two technical administrators and eight instructors) who were asked one open-ended question item concerning the possibilities of the course improvements.

The purpose of this study was to describe the students' perspectives of online course *Ana Tele*, specifically, their perceptions of useful and challenging components of the course. Table 1 shows data sources, participants, their demographic data, and a method of data analysis for both two research stages.

Table 1 Data Sources, Participants, Demographics, and Methods of Data Analysis

Research Stage	Data source	Participants	Demographics	Method of data analysis
Stage 1	Survey	170 students who learned the Tatar language with *Ana Tele* for a period of 6 months or more	1) Gender: male – 10 participants; female – 160 participants 2) Age: under 35 – 68 participants; 36-45 – 60 participants; over 46 – 42 participants 3) Nationality: Russian	Quantitative (raw numbers for all close-ended questions)
	Face-to-face interview	10 students who completed the survey	1) Gender: male – 1 participant; female – 10 participants 2) Age: 36-45 3) Nationality: Russian	Qualitative (coding for themes of one open ended question item)
Stage 2	Face-to-face interview	10 course developers: 2 technical administrators and 8 instructors	Male – 2, female – 8; Age group under 35 – 2 participants, 36-45 – 6 participants, over 46 – 2 participants	Qualitative (coding for themes)

In this study the authors used quantitative (closed response questionnaire)

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and qualitative (interview) research methodology for data collection. The quantitative survey study explores the students' practices of platform *Ana Tele*as an online educational environment for learning the Tatar language. The instrument used in this survey was the questionnaire that consisted of seven questions (see Appendix 1).

Findings and discussion

The authors analyzed strong points, as well as challenging characteristics of *Ana Tele* online language school as the example of a self-paced online course from the learners' perceptions and online learning experiences (based both on a survey and follow-up face-to-face interviews).

Questions 1-4 of the survey revealed demographic information about the students and their language use, as well as their evaluation of self-motivation, the frequency they login their *Ana Tele* account and students' Tatar language level. The research showed that the students of the course are active users of *Ana Tele*, with 59 students (34,7%) who login their *Ana Tele* account daily; 90 students (52,9%) login weekly and 21 students (12,4%) monthly.

Questions 5-6 comprised of items enquiring information on the students' practices and preferences of language aspects and tasks which were chosen by the authors according to two different formats of language learning: self-paced and collaborative.

Students' preferences of language aspects (grammar, vocabulary, listening exercises or speaking) are represented in Figure 1. The age of the recipients was much more essential factor while evaluating the preferences of types of activities than their level of the Tatar language on the platform *Ana Tele*. According to the data analyzed in the research, there is a strong tendency of correlation between the students' age group and the preference of the activities type (collaborative or self-paced). The elder the student, the more likely he is apt to choose a self-paced open online course than a collaborative one (see Figure 2). This aligns with previous research findings that demonstrate that the method of learning typical to an adult student is closely connected with metacognition concepts and a psychologically approved desire to develop their life experience and show independence while learning course materials. All this results on adult learners' wish to obtain knowledge, control knowledge and control the process of learning itself which leads to high motivation (Knowles et al., 2005; Cross, 2009; Rakap, 2010).

Figure 1 Q5. When studying certain aspects of the Tatar language suggested by the platform ANA TELE which of the following did you like most? (You can choose more than one)
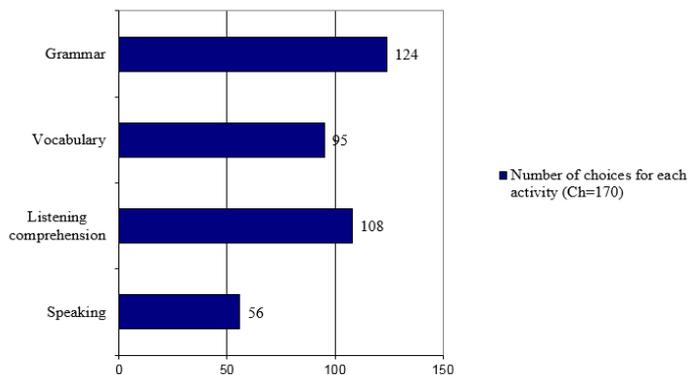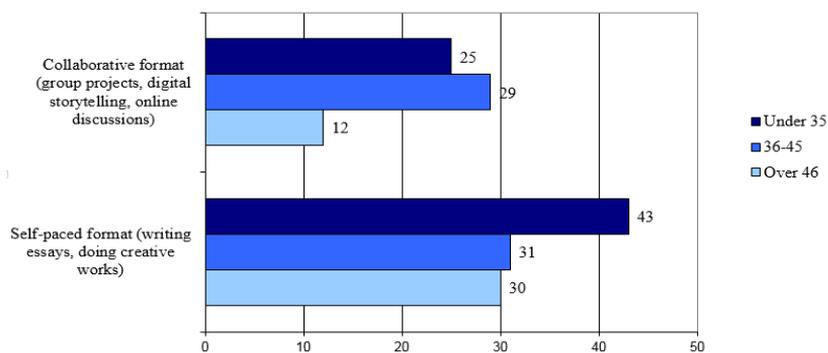

Figure 2Q6. As a student, which of the following tasks would you be interested to complete on the platform ANA TELE? (You can choose more than one)

The follow-up interviews with the students who completed the survey comprised the following question: *What pluses and minuses of the course Ana Tele can you name?* The results of this interview reveal that students value a deep dive into Tatar culture, a possibility to take your own pace while studying, a choice of language levels, availability (a learner does not have to be a University student), flexibility (absence of deadlines and any schedules) and opportunity to take the course free of charge.

Among the most common drawbacks of the course from the students' perspectives were the following: absence of real communication; lack of translation into Russian which causes difficulties in understanding grammar and vocabulary (in particular in cases when vocabulary is presented in pictures) and difficulties in understanding the authentic fluent speech. Moreover, interviewees mentioned technical problems with speaking sessions, absence of mobile applications and absence of technical possibility to create an electronic dictionary for the sake of training directly on the site.

In spite of this, the results of the research, both based on a questionnaire and follow-up face-to-face interviews, showed that exciting activities, funny videos and authentic texts within Tatar national context (available at all language levels), which

are appreciated by Tatar language learners, compensate for the lack of face-to-face communication and students' social presence.

The following quotes illustrate overall positive impression of the course, however, show that the absence of mobile applications and some technical problems as well as using Cyrillic alphabet with some specific Tatar symbols are viewed as a drawback.

> "I started learning Tatar with a course book about a year ago. When my friend recommended *Ana Tele* platform I joined the course, level three, and I quickly became hooked and realized that learning the language online is much more exciting and motivating than with course books. That's a pity they don't suggest Android app. I travel a lot but, unfortunately, I can't continue learning during my trips." (Ann, 25)

> "I was really interested in the platform *Ana Tele*: Tatar language is one of the things from my list-to-do; by the time I was told about it I had already had an experience of making an online course, so I eagerly tried the platform.
> The best thing about it is the idea itself. I mean putting the minority language learning online, giving the Tatar culture a chance to come to a broader audience. I am convinced that there should be more projects of the kind, so that the learner gets a choice.
> Whereas the idea was extremely motivating for me, the realization wasn't at all. I experienced some technical problems. Firstly, the lack of Tatar keyboard– for the writing assignments I had to google for some symbols, I remember how frustrating it was. Secondly, some videos wouldn't work.The technical realization needs to be more flexible: nowadays learners use different kinds of operational systems." (Aliya, 34)

Most interviewees indicated that the online speaking sessions are the weakest element of *Ana Tele*. This new activity started in January 2013 and it is currently in progress.The speaking classes are optional (the learners do not have to complete this part in order to move to the next level).The interviews with the students revealthe learners' dissatisfaction with technical maintenance. As a result, some students quickly refused to join online speaking sessions. The following quote illustrates this fact:

> "I've tried to join the online speaking classes for several times but I failed. Each time I log in, a system error would occur. I was so unhappy I wasn't able to fulfill the speaking exercises." (Timur, 28)

In Stage Two of this research the course developers were asked the following question: *How in your opinion could the online course Ana Tele be improved?*According to the interviewees, the course would benefit if firstly, speaking classes become obligatory, secondly, introductory video-instructed materials are added and thirdly, a certificate that indicates successful completion of the levels and the whole course is offered to the students. Moreover, the course developers indicated at technical problems that decrease motivation for speaking classes.

"I believe one of the ways to improve *Ana Tele* online school is to suggest the learners to take a final exam consisting of a test and an oral online session, and if they manage to complete all the assignments give a Statement of Accomplishment. This would motive learners, in particular to join online speaking sessions. I think natural face-to-face communication is hugely important." (Guzel, instructor)

"We are thinking about giving more accurate instructions to our students. The course is designed for independent learners who prefer to work individually. If given precise instructions, the learners would avoid difficulties and manage their time effectively. The improvement would affect online speaking sessions since their efficiency mainly depends on compliance with technical requirements." (Lenar, technical administrator)

As the study shows, Tatar online self-paced course is an opportunity for independent learners (primarily adults) to work through the suggested material at their own pace. Among the benefits of the course the students mentioned full and varied content and lenient time-table, free participation and convenience. As the most encouraging feature of the course many learners pointed cultural content that increases the popularity of Tatar as the minority language.

However, according to both learners and course developers the course should not lack online communication that is a natural way of gaining knowledge. The technical problems that are currently a serious impediment to efficient speaking practice should be solved.

Conclusion and implications

In this research a special focus was made on the Tatar language learners' and the course developers' perception of useful components and challenges of the open online course *Ana Tele* that are to be considered while creating online educational projects for minority languages. The analysis of the international online language-learning practice (self-paced and structured course *Ana Tele*) showed that nowadays online access is effective and beneficial for learning a language, the self-paced format being increasingly demanded and appreciated by students. According to the interviewees, the benefits of the course include culturally-oriented topics, the variety of language levels to choose, availability and being free of charge.

Though *Ana Tele* course content on the whole received an approving assessment of the learners, further improvements might be concerned with vocabulary enlargement, creating an online electronic dictionary and mobile application development. According to the data, Tatar language learners and course developers realize the importance of communication and speaking activities though both indicated insufficient technical support of online sessions.

Studying Tatar online in the described self-paced format could benefit in case more accurate instructions introduce each task and activity, which is especially important at the initial stages of the course. This could have important implications for fostering self-reliance and appropriate study time allocation skills. The range of detailed instructions might include *timing*, *suggesting integrated examples or situation examples* that could show how exactly the assignment is to be done, *detailed description of exercise completion*, *tips to cope with errors and reduce mistakes*, etc. All these could compensate for the lack of instructor/teacher supervision and help improve personal effective learning strategies of self-pacers.

These findings carry significant implications for further studies and practice.

The suggested strategies for future research include qualitative and quantitative evaluation of online collaborative speaking sessions with a teacher-instructor, the challenge which is presently being considered by *Ana Tele* platform. Further feedback from the students studying Tatar online could shed light on the effectiveness of organizing speaking activities and collaborative work, including the format of suggested activities and technical maintenance.

Ana Tele is a good linguistic support to increase social functions of Tatar as a minority language. Availability of the course decreases social inferiority of Tatar and creates extra social opportunities for using the minority language in various fields of communication.

Appendix
Questionnaire for students of online school for the Tatar language *Ana Tele*
Please answer the questions and underline (or highlight) selected answer/answers.

1. Mark your level on the platform *Ana Tele*:1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9
_____
2. How often do you log in to *Ana Tele*account?
1) Daily
2) Weekly
3) Monthly
_____
3. What age group do you belong to:
1) under 35 years
2) 36-45 years
3) 46 years and older
_____
4. How do you identify your gender?
1) Male
2) Female
_____
5. How do you evaluate the self-motivation in the study of the Tatar on the platform *Ana Tele*?
1) I have low self-motivation, I constantly need to be controlled by a teacher.
2) I'm rather self-motivated, but sometimes I need to be controlled by a teacher.
3) I'm highly self-motivated and do not need to be controlled by a teacher.
_____
6. When studying certain aspects of the Tatar language suggested by the platform *Ana Tele*which of the following did you like most? (You can choose more than one)
1) Grammar
2) Vocabulary
3) Listening comprehension
4) Speaking
_____
7. As a student, which of the following tasks would you be interested to complete on the platform *Ana Tele*? (You can choose more than one):
1) Writing essays.
2) Doing collaborative group projects.
3) Digital storytelling (uploading video or photo material).
4) Participating in online discussions.
5) Doing creative works in a self-paced format.

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